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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES ETHNIC MINORITY ISSUES IN HOA BINH AND SON LA PROVINCES

REF: 1) HANOI 697, 2) HANOI 715

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On a March 13-15 visit, the Ambassador discussed ethnic minority issues with the leaders of Hoa Binh and Son La Provinces (reftels). Son La has a much larger potential problem with ethnic tension arising from the massive displacement of ethnic minority Thai communities by the Son La dam reservoir. Each resettled village will force the Provincial People's Committee (PPC) to make hard decisions to reduce inevitable disruptions. A model resettled community demonstrates that these issues will take significant time to resolve. Son La's focus on integrationist programs like an ethnic minority boarding school, however, may go far in helping reduce ethnic unrest in the province. End Summary.

HOA BINH  
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¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador met with Hoa Binh PPC Chairman Bui Van Tinh on March 13. As part of a discussion on economic and religious freedom issues (reftels), Tinh noted that Hoa Binh's 800,000 people are divided between seven main ethnic groups. Sixty-three percent of the population is ethnic Muong, as is the majority of the PPC staff including the Chairman. All seven groups are "coming together in solidarity and unity" and "there are no flashpoints for protest in the province," he said. This is helped by the fact that, though Muong people are technically a separate ethnicity from the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese), they are considered a related branch of the majority ethnicity so there is less ethnic tension compared to other provinces. Most Muong take Kinh names and are not physically distinguishable from other Vietnamese. (Note: We have not heard of any ethnic issues arising in this province to date, which tracks with the Chairman's comments. End note.) The Ambassador observed that this lack of ethnic tension puts Hoa Binh ahead of some other highland provinces in its plans for social and economic development, but warned that education demands particular attention in majority ethnic minority areas. On a recent trip to Gia Lai province in the Central Highlands, for example, the Ambassador said he met an ethnic family which did not value education at all because it was not "traditional." None of the children had been to school and were now too old to be given the opportunity of education. "Their traditions had closed the door on their participation in development," he added.

SON LA  
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13. (SBU) As noted in reftels, Son La PPC Chairman Hoang Chi Thuc's approach to most issues was generally a stark contrast with the Hoa Binh Chairman's attitudes. However, on ethnic minority issues, Chairman Thuc was much more attentive than his colleague. During his laborious opening presentation to the Ambassador on March 14, Thuc noted that the Son La dam project is one of the main priorities for PPC policy in this province of 900,000 because the new reservoir will displace many thousands of ethnic "White" Thai residents to other communities. (Note: The dam project management board originally estimated that at least 80,000 people will have to be relocated by 2010, but the likely number is much higher. End Note). The province has taken the lead to resettle 12,000 households in locations "better than their original villages." Over dinner the following evening, Thuc elaborated that Son La benefits financially from the resettlement effort despite having to relocate so many people because the GVN has provided significant funding for new schools, new roads and new irrigation in resettled communities. The GVN will also give subsidies directly to each person resettled so villagers will be able to invest in their new communities. Son La will receive 100 million VND (USD 62,000) to move each household, a relatively small amount of which will actually go to the villagers in cash. (Note: This equates to roughly USD 744 Million for the total resettlement project. End Note.)

14. (SBU) Thuc acknowledged that resettlement of the reservoir basin will be difficult for some people because they are "very familiar with their former places of residence" and will need to get used to a new community. However, Hoa Binh has developed a phased relocation strategy to reassure people that their new homes will be sustainable. The first step is for villagers to dismantle their homes and community buildings. The province then transports the village to its new location. Villagers reassemble their homes and community buildings. Once the new community is

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built, the PPC reclaims the surrounding land from previous "owners"; this land is then given to the villagers for farming. The villagers receive rice and money for two years to tide them over while their new lands are brought under cultivation. The final phase of the project will include new training for the farmers to increase productivity.

Phieng Bung Village

15. (SBU) On March 14, the Ambassador visited one of the first resettled communities, the ethnic "White" Thai village of Phieng Bung. The village is located off the main road between the Son La dam location and Son La town. It is reached by a new road, still under construction, that cuts across three or four miles of cultivated rice paddies and orchards. Phien Bung was built in the middle of a mango orchard with regular rows of mango trees interspersed with well-ordered, reassembled homes. The effect was somewhat incongruous. A one-room kindergarten and one-room elementary school are currently under construction in the village square. The village elder told the Ambassador that Phieng Bung's 246 people began disassembling their sixty-five households in October 2005. Each person received 3 million VND (USD 188) directly from the province for the move. Son La provided trucks for the movement. All houses in the new location have electricity.

16. (SBU) The headman noted that the province has not yet provided land for the villagers to farm. They are surviving only on the rice and other foodstuffs they have been given by the province. People are generally happy in their new community, but worried about the land issue. There is also some difficulty arising from the fact that the original owner of the mango trees planted throughout their community still owns and works the trees. Compensation and access issues have still to be worked out with the farmer.

Provincial officials reassured him that all of these problems will be resolved by the end of March.

#### Ethnic Minority Boarding School

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17. (SBU) Following the visit to the resettled village, the Ambassador visited the Son La Ethnic Minority Boarding School in Son La town. School Director Cam Van Nghiep explained that the school was established in 1956 as an institution to prepare select ethnic minority students for university or vocational training colleges. In its fifty year history, more than two thousand students have graduated from the school of whom forty percent attended university. There are currently 450 students enrolled in the school's three classes: grades 10-12. Six of the twenty-three teachers are "considered excellent by provincial standards" (i.e., hold high university degrees) and another four are "excellent by local standards" (i.e., attended university). The school was renovated in 1994. It is situated on an island in the middle of a lake reached by a paved causeway. There are fifteen classrooms and fifty-two dormitory bedrooms that house eight students each. The school also boasts a science laboratory and a computer lab. The language of instruction is Vietnamese. The only foreign language taught in the school is English, but the faculty hopes to add Chinese and Russian. The annual school budget is about USD 150,000 or six million VND per student.

18. (SBU) Nghiep noted that the province covers all expenses for students. They are selected out of the best students from a number of ethnic minority middle schools across the province. Average age is fifteen years at selection but in a few cases, students as old as twenty have joined Grade 10. These are usually special exceptions allowed for students drawn from smaller ethnic minority groups in more remote regions. Upon admission, students are required to sign a written agreement that they will obey the law and "avoid social evils" while enrolled. Students are drawn from all twelve of the major ethnic minority groups in the province, but the school tries to encourage each individual to maintain their own ethnic identities. The school tends to favor admission of students from other groups besides the province's majority minority ethnic Thai. Nearly half of the student body is female, but this is a relatively recent trend. In 1990, less than two percent of the students were girls. None of the students profess any religion. The Ambassador encouraged the director to recruit some of the ethnic minority children from among the approximately 5,000 Christians in the province. They deserve access to education as well non-believers and their identity is also

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important, he said.

19. (SBU) At the dinner with Chairman Thuc, the Ambassador applauded Son La's efforts to educate ethnic minority students for positions of responsibility in the province. He was especially pleased to see so many girls attending the boarding school, he said. However, the Ambassador emphasized the importance of recruiting students from ethnic minority Christian communities so that all students share in the advanced opportunities the school offers.

Comment

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110. (SBU) Hoa Binh's ethnic minority majority population seems far better integrated than the Son La's people, but Hoa Binh does not face the huge potential problems created in Son La by the displacement of nearly one ninth of its residents by the Son La dam. The model resettled village was impressive, but if it truly represents the size and makeup of the average displaced community, Son La will have to repeat this effort at least 184 more times. Even in this pilot village, after six months the PPC has not begun to

address the hard problems created by its reestablishment. Each resettled community will force the PPC to decide who owns the land they live on, how much compensation is due to previous owners, whose land should be allocated to the new village, etc. Given the huge amount of money provided by the GVN to resettle these people, the tensions caused by their displacement will almost assuredly be exacerbated by the corruption of officials charged with supervising their move. The PPC's focus on integrationist programs like the ethnic minority boarding school seems to reflect growing concerns about ethnic tension in the province. If they are able to expand the franchise of such programs beyond an elite set of ethnic minority individuals, they may go far in helping reduce ethnic unrest in Son La. End Comment.

MARINE